CORAL GABLES
by Ellen J. Uguccioni

A well planned city, beautiful homes, widest range of scholastic activities, with the material, the communal, the municipal, and the cultural phases of life fittingly rounded out by those religious organizations, so especially a part of the foundation of American life and outlook--the whole developing a highly conscious citizenship. That is Coral Gables.
George Edgar Merrick, *Coral Gables Facts,* 1927

Defining the City of Coral Gables as a ***neighborhood*** is a pleasurable task to undertake. Identities of neighborhoods can hinge upon the common characteristics of its residents or the distinctive character of the place itself. I would suggest that the most compelling reason to set an area apart is a combination of personalities *and* place, leavened by a strong sense of shared history. *And what a history it was!* One runs out of superlatives when discussing this unique city. The City of Coral Gables is deserving of its reputation, for the virtuosity demonstrated by its creators is unparalleled in the context of all other "Boom-time" communities.

> *"Highly restricted, intelligently zoned, architecture and landscaping coordinated and controlled, every modern utility, recreational facilities, and hotel accommodations unsurpassed."*

This was how the creators of the City of Coral Gables described their new enclave, which while not incorporated until 1925, was begun in 1921. The control of design in the development of a town or city is a luxury afforded very few communities. However, few communities were led by as beneficent an autocrat with as clear a vision as that held by George Edgar Merrick, the insightful poet of the tropical experience.

Merrick had come to South Florida with his father, the Reverend Solomon Greasley Merrick and family in 1899. Beginning with a homestead of 160 acres, the Reverend Merrick began to farm the land and live off the profits from the sales of the produce. He envisioned the offer of similar "retirement packages" to other clergy who were ready to leave the ministry. When Reverend Merrick died in 1911, those plans would be changed and replaced with something on a far grander scale.

Twenty-five-year-old George Edgar Merrick, who was away at law school in New York when his father passed away, returned back to the plantation to direct its operation. He was soon

to become enmeshed in local real estate transactions in Miami, which would provide him the opportunity to refine his ideas for what would become a community uniquely his own.

That community, which would be the City of Coral Gables, was controlled at every stage, with no digressions from the strict standards initially set out. T. H. Weigall, a British journalist who worked as a publicity writer for George Merrick, offered this portrait of him:

> *Mr. Merrick, cloistered in his deeply-carpeted office high above the Central Administration Building, that office from which he could look out over almost the whole of this unbelievable creation that was his own, retained control with an iron hand. Nothing could be done without his approval, nothing could be held back when once he had ordered it should go forward. His will was absolute and immutable.* **(Boom in Paradise, 1932.)**

The guiding principles of the development were the spacious plazas, the long,winding boulevards, the vistas created by buildings set well back from those sweeping roadways, and the Mediterranean designs which made reference to centuries-old buildings in Italy, the French and Italian Riviera, the north coast of Africa, and Spain (both Castilian and Moorish). These were a product of the "ruling class," a group of architects, artists, planners, engineers, landscape architects, and visionaries who set the priorities and insured that the developmental goals of the city were met. While first and foremost a residential community, the planners set aside a business area and a Crafts Section, so that the day-to-day needs of the citizens could be met.

The destiny of Coral Gables was guaranteed by this studied, programmed approach. But it was not solely the designers who can be credited with the visual cohesiveness of this development. It was, in fact, the first City Commission, largely composed of officers of the Coral Gables Corporation, who advanced the continuity of design and development through regulation.

In August of 1925, under the flamboyant Mayor Edward E. "Doc" Dammers, the City codified its first Building Code, which addressed the construction, rehabilitation, and (even at this tender age) demolition, of all buildings within the city. The provisions of this Code included a ban against frame construction, requirements that all doors, windows and vents be arched and that walls be constructed of coral rock or concrete of "Spanish type," and a requirement that all roofs be covered with clay or concrete tile.

From the very beginning all designs were required to have the approval of the City's Supervising Architect Phineas Paist, and by 1925, that review was made a mandatory part of the

city's permit process. Every set of plans was scrutinized by Paist to insure that they met with the strict design standards established for the development.

Paist was a native of Philadelphia who had attended the Drexel Institute of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He came to Miami in 1918 at the request of Paul Chalfin, who asked him to become the supervising architect for James Deering's winter estate, Villa Vizcaya. Soon thereafter, Paist was employed in the building of the new city of Coral Gables, first as the "Supervisor of Color" and later as "Supervising Architect".

Paist, writing for the *National Builder* in October 1924, had this to say about his employer:

> *George Merrick, whose remarkable business instinct and, strangely enough, whose inner self is mixed with poetry (actual saleable poetry) deserves commendation from architects, builders, and material men for the opportunity of building a town, a designed town, architecturally harmonious, and a town intelligently different from the average horribly discordant aberrations that are usual in new developments . He has had the vision and has obtained results for holding control of all architectural and landscape schemes and finally of all the local color of the town.*

Every detail of the city was carefully considered, and "quality of life" amenities were keys to its success. Toward that end, Merrick promised that his community would offer the finest of educational, recreational, institutional, and religious facilities. His were not just promises, but convictions supported by actual investment.

In a letter to the School Board dated June 5, 1923, Merrick offered the land to build the Coral Gables Elementary School, valued at over $76,000, for only $10,000. He justified his most generous offer by explaining that the school was intended as a key building in a group of civic and community center buildings, which would include a library, bank, post office and a $100,000 Community Congregational Church (Coral Gables Congregational). The master plan by architect Richard Kiehnel was "...to be of such character and of such artistic architecture and setting as to be entirely unique among American communities."

When the Riviera Section of the development was announced in May, 1925, one of its principal features was "a great open-air University." One hundred and sixty acres (coincidentally the same number of the original plantation) were set aside by the Coral Gables Corporation, and Merrick personally endowed the University with five million dollars. The University of Miami was projected to cost some fifteen million dollars, consist of twenty-two buildings and overlook

an impressive lake. Phineas Paist, the "dean" of Coral Gables' architects, Paul Chalfin (the artistic director for *Villa Vizcaya*) and Denman Fink (that remarkable painter and illustrator whose images on canvas were transformed in three dimensions) were all appointed to the Board of Consulting Architects for the University.

Not surprisingly, the original architectural theme for the University was inspired by Spanish and Italian prototypes. (The collapse of the Boom and subsequent Depression stalled or prevented many of Merrick's building projects from their realization. In the case of the University, which began in earnest following the Second World War, the campus was to be realized but in a decidedly International style, reflecting the then current aspirations and philosophy of its leaders.)

The Riviera Section was also to include Coral Gables' most venerated historic landmark, the Biltmore Hotel. After having directed his attention to creating ideal homes and educational and institutional facilities, Merrick began his plans for a grand hotel and country club. As early as February, 1924 Merrick announced his plans for the complex, illustrated with a drawing of the hotel by architect Martin Luther Hampton. When the prominent John McEntee Bowman, president of the "Bowman-Biltmore Hotels Corporation," agreed to partner with Merrick some nine months later, the architectural firm of Schultze and Weaver was commissioned for the final design. The hotel opened with a dazzling spectacle on January 15, 1926.

The Riviera Section has another part to its history, which today is unfitting and conflicts with our ideas about Merrick's insightful and inspired efforts to create an ideal community. One can only acknowledge that during this stage of the nation's history, prejudice against African-Americans was across-the-board, and while an unconvincing and emotionally unsatisfactory response, that was just the way it was. The Riviera Section was home to many black pioneer families who made possible the construction of many enduring monuments. In 1925, Merrick, recognizing the requirement to segregate these families and maintain a cohesiveness to his development, offered a land swap to African-American home owners and moved the community just south of US 1 at LeJeune Road to an area platted as the MacFarlane Homestead Subdivision. Many of the homes can be characterized as either a bungalow or shot-gun type, reflecting the vernacular traditions of their builders. All of the deeds for homes constructed in the city had this provision:

> *That no unlawful or immoral use shall be made of the premises hereby agreed to be conveyed nor, shall the same nor any part thereof nor any interest therein, be sold, leased* or *otherwise conveyed to any person other than of the Caucasian race ,provided that nothing therein shall prevent the keeping and maintaining of servants on the said property for reasonable family use.*

This abhorrent regulation has long since been abolished, but its consequences are an important part of our history. That fact has been recognized by the city in the local historic landmark designation of the MacFarlane Homestead Subdivision Historic District. Later, as a result of a neighborhood initiative, the Federal government conferred the venerable status of National Register listing to this unique "neighborhood within a neighborhood."

> *Always it seemed to me that there should be the same class of houses and surroundings which were along the shores of the Mediterranean. Geographically and climactically South Florida is identified with Spain, North Africa, and all that lies between them and the South Sea islands.* George Edgar Merrick, 1925

There has been much ink spilled, and countless intellectual arguments conducted, as to the proper term to describe the architecture of Coral Gables. Merrick himself is frequently quoted as describing the designs as "Spanish," while others on the original team wax eloquent on the subject of Italian precedents. Clearly, the compositions by the original architects rely heavily on examples of buildings in the countries that border the Mediterranean Sea. Because the expression of their art is *extrapolation* rather than *invention,* the term most widely applied is Mediterranean Revival, indicating the source of the inspiration, and acknowledging the long history of precedents that influenced the designs. The architects could easily have copied from centuries-old prototypes, but did not find it necessary.

In an interview with Merrick by S.M. Shelton published in the November 1923 issue of *Suniland Magazine*, Shelton observes:

> *In making Coral Gables a faithful reproduction of the best that is to be found in Old Spain and other countries on the Mediterranean, Mr. Merrick has employed a staff of architects familiar with European subjects. ...From this it should not be judged that Coral Gables is copied exactly from the Spanish cities. The best ideas which could be obtained there have been brought to Florida and subjected to careful study...with the result that while modifications have frequently been made, the type of building has been preserved and numerous features have been added which have increased the comfort of the Spanish style houses of Coral Gables and added to their attractiveness. In other words, Coral Gables has neither borrowed or stolen, but it is the original work of skilled craftsmen who know how to combine the best.*

An example of the successful "hybridization" that occurred in the city is the Coral Gables City Hall Building. The building was designed by Phineas Paist and Harold Steward. The cornerstone was laid in November, 1927 and was formally opened on February 28,1928. The most striking feature of the building is its two-story portico which is oriented towards a major intersection. The colonnaded porch turns back to ancient Greek and Roman examples, and indeed comes by way of a Neo-Classical tradition.

Phineas Paist, who was born, raised and educated in Philadelphia, must have been tremendously impressed by the Merchants Exchange Building designed by William Strickland (1788-1854) at Third and Walnut Streets, and completed in 1824. The building, which housed the stock exchange and post office, has a more than striking similarity to Coral Gables' City Hall. While the resemblance to the basic form of the Philadelphia structure is obvious, it is the subtlety with which Paist and Steward handle the detail that illustrates its transcendence into the subtropical realm. The Corinthian is exchanged for the Ionic order; a copper roof is replaced with tile, and a cylindrical cupola is replaced with a three-stage rectangular bell tower, Coral rock, the indigenous stone of the area, clads the base of the building . Perhaps the most striking parallel is the significance placed on the siting of the building.

Philadelphia's Exchange Building occupies the focal point of a vast plaza within the intersection of three streets. The rotunda serves to direct one's attention to the apex of that intersection, focusing the broad avenues as befits a structure of this symbolic magnitude. Similarly, Paist uses a triangular parcel of ground at the intersection of Coral Way, LeJeune Road and Biltmore Way to achieve a vista where the building can be seen in its most striking pose. The Philadelphia building has been transposed so that it boasts a provenance uniquely Coral Gables.

While the architectural theme of the city overall was Mediterranean in character, Merrick introduced the idea of theme villages to add color diversity and a little surprise. In July 1925, Merrick conveyed title to large tracts of land earmarked for residential development to the Myers Y. Cooper Company, architect and builder for the American Building Company, both headquartered in Ohio. Although we commonly refer to all of these enclaves which have a specific architectural heritage as *villages,* some were originally referred to only by "type."

Blocks and blocks of land were set aside for the creation of these "anomalies". Unfortunately, construction began at the end of the Boom, and fewer homes were constructed than planned. Those homes that were built are especially treasured, and are remarkable in their design and ornamentation. They are the Florida Pioneer Type (often referred to as the Southern Colonial Village) on Santa Maria Street, designed by John and Coulton Skinner, and the French 18th Century Village Type on Hardee Road. While the entire length of Hardee was to have contained these types, only two distinct villages were actually built, and we have used the adjectives *city* and *country* to distinguish the more formal examples from those that have a more rustic character. The French City Village in the 1000 Block of Hardee Road was designed by Mott B. Schmidt and the French Country Village in the 500 Block by Frank Forster, Edgar Albright, and Phillip L. Goodwin.

The other villages that were built include the Chinese Village, designed by Henry Killam Murphy, south of U.S. 1 at the 5100 block of Riviera Drive; the French Normandy Village designed by John and Coulton Skinner on Lejeune Road at Viscaya Avenue, the Dutch South African Village designed by Marion Syms Wyeth on LeJeune Road at Maya Avenue, and the Italian Village, (600 Block of Altara Avenue; and non-contiguous locations in the 4200 and 4300 Block of Monseratte Street, 4100-4400 Blocks of Palmarito, and sites on San Esteban and San Lorenzo Avenues), designed by John and Coulton Skinner, R.F. Ware, A.K. Klingbeil, and Robert Law Weed.

The villages that were never built offer a glimpse into the fantastic variety and infinite creativity of the plan. They were the Neapolitan Baroque Type, the Spanish Bazaar and Town Type, the Persian Village type, the Mexican Pioneer or Hacienda type, and the Tangier Village type.

Another great plan that was never realized was the most ambitious the development would offer: the Biscayne Bay Section, a six-mile stretch of bayfront property that contained over six thousand acres of land. Merrick and the design team had plans for another magnificent hotel (to be even bigger than the Biltmore), wide boulevards, lakes, and the construction of twelve islands that would be connected to the mainland by a series of bridges. Though we can only imagine what that completed plan would have meant to Coral Gables, we can get a glimpse of what it would have been like through the legendary Tahiti Beach.

Tahiti Beach was intended to provide guests from the Biltmore Hotel with a saltwater beach, and was connected to the hotel by the waterways. When it opened in February 1926, guests were treated to the exoticism of the South Seas with thatched huts, an open-air dance pavilion and dining room. When these were destroyed by hurricanes, Tahiti Beach was a public swimming area until it was closed in the early '70s when the land became the site of Cocoplum, one of the city's most exclusive subdivisions.

There are two enduring masterpieces in the Biscayne Bay subdivision that date from a later period in the City's history: Matheson Hammock Park and Fairchild Tropical Garden. Matheson Hammock was the first public beach dedicated to the people of Dade County. The original 84 acres (later expanded to 520 acres) were a gift of William Matheson in 1930. In 1933, under the New Deal's Economic Recovery Act, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) began dredging the swimming lagoon, quarried the native coral rock and built the bath house, concession buildings and bridges.

Colonel Robert Montgomery and his wife Nell had an overwhelming interest in plant collecting (particularly palms and cycads), which led to the purchase of an estate in the southern part of Coral Gables. In 1938 Montgomery donated the first fifty-eight acres of land for the internationally renowned Fairchild Tropical Garden, named for David Fairchild, a friend of the Montgomery family and the first director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The garden was designed by William Lyman Phillips, and the grounds, walls and Gate House were laid out and constructed by the CCC.

While the grand scheme for Coral Gables as envisioned by George Merrick never saw completion, what *was* finished was sufficiently masterful to endure as a lasting monument to suburban design. In his book *Boom in Paradise* , author Weigall lamented: *"It was rather unfortunate that the architectural restrictions of almost all of the 'ideal 'cities tended to prevent the evolution of any essentially Florida tradition."* Ironically perhaps, the exponents of the City's boom have now become the standards upon which we have begun to judge "good" architecture, for those early buildings represent an historical truth, judged today from a substantial seventy-five year perspective. For as changing artistic values, burgeoning immigration and unyielding demands of growth have witnessed the erosion of a common tradition and uniform set of objectives, those early architectural masterworks have assumed a special importance.

In fact it could be argued that the exponents of the master architects of the Boom spawned a tradition that *could* be considered archetypal. The reasons for this conclusion come not only from the individual examples of residences, public buildings, commercial buildings, educational and religious institutions, but also from those "impractical" and costly amenities such as plazas, entrances, fountains, landscape, special street lighting, pigmented sidewalks and boulevards with one hundred foot medians. Those elements reflected the paradigms of high-minded city planning.

Largely due to the carefully orchestrated marketing campaign costing over five million dollars and conducted during the six months between October, 1923 and March, 1924, seven million dollars worth of property was sold. During that time, more than six hundred homes were constructed, sixty-five miles of roadway of crushed coral rock were laid, and over eighty miles of sidewalks were added. In addition, fifty thousand trees, shrubs and flowering plants were planted, and a system of lighting installed which covered over twenty-eight miles of the City. Coral Gables experienced the phenomenon of a land boom which reflected the disposable income and aspirations of a public deeply ensconced in the pursuit of the American ideal.

The identity of Coral Gables was further reinforced by creating at its edges monuments that would act as portals to convey the visitor into this special place. Denman Fink, whose official title was "Artistic Advisor," is credited with the concept of these great entryways. They are the Douglas Entrance (8th Street and Douglas Road,) the Commercial Entrance (Alhambra Circle and Douglas Road,) the Granada Entrance (Granada Boulevard and 8th Street,) and the Country Club Prado Entrance (Country Club Prado and 8th Street), which were completed before the end of the Boom. .

Tracing the history of the Boom in South Florida is similar to watching a soaring comet explode into the sky and then just as quickly disappear. When building materials failed to reach their destinations because of over-crowded railroad yards and harbors, when clouded titles resultant from the unrecorded multiple exchanges of property continued to be valued higher and higher so that their real value was over-inflated, when infrastructure improvements were unable to be made, when negative publicity started to come from outside of Florida, and when the hurricane of September, 1926 struck, the Boom communities went into abrupt decline and by 1927, virtually everything had come to a standstill.

The phenomenon that is Coral Gables, and which set it apart from neighboring boom-time communities, is that the leaders who brought back the financial stability after the collapse recognized the aesthetic imperatives established by the creators. They understood that continuing that tradition was a sure way to proven success, and they chose not to diverge from a strictly regulated course. Other communities simply fell apart as their originating principles were not of such a comprehensive type and failed to capture sufficient interest.

As we move further into this new century, the task will be to continue a discerning attitude when making decisions that address preservation and development issues. The City of Coral Gables offers a unique opportunity to encourage the retention of its *neighborhood* character, which so beautifully reflects the aspirations, values, and ideals of its creators. Our task will be to maintain the continuum of time treating with judicious respect the exponents of our past, and the expressions of our future.

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Ellen J. Uguccioni directed the historic preservation office of the City of Coral Gables for fourteen years, serving as its first Director. She has lectured extensively on the subject to national, state, and local audiences. Ms. Uguccioni is a prodigious author , having written numerous articles throughout her career. She is the co-author (with Samuel D. LaRoue Jr.) of* Coral Gables in Postcards. *Ms. Uguccioni has served three terms as the Architectural Historian for the Florida National Review Board and has been a member of the adjunct faculty of the University of Miami's School of Architecture for ten years.

Photo Captions for Coral Gables

1. **George Merrick's father, Solomon, built this home for his family in the early 1900s out of oolitic limestone, or "coral rock," covering its multi-gabled roof with coral-colored Ludowici tiles and naming it Coral Gables. George Merrick would later use the name for his 1920s real estate development. Coral Gables House, located at 907 Coral Way, is now a museum**. (*Courtesy of the Miami-Dade Historic Preservation Division)*

2. **The Coral Gables Congregational Church was built in 1923-25 on land donated by George Merrick, whose father had been a Congregational minister. It was the first church in Florida to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.** *(Courtesy of Dade Heritage Trust)*

3. **The interior of this Coral Gables home, which predates the Mediterranean style of the 1920s, features beamed ceilings and coral rock walls.** *(Courtesy of Amelia Rea Maguire and Jose Gelabert Navia)*

4. **Coral Gables Deverloper George Merrick, in white shoes, discusses marketing plans with the straw-hatted "Doc" Dammers in an early office located in Ddowntown Miami. Even the "Coral Gables Water" cooler touts the benefits of the new city.** *(Courtesy of the Sam LaRoue Collection)*

5. **Venetian Pool, at 2701 DeSoto Boulevard, was built in 1924-25 out of a quarry pit used to mine the oolitic limestone used in many of the early Coral Gables structures. William Jennings Bryan often gave speeches here, and orchestras provided entertainment for the crowds at the romantic lagoon. The pool is still a favorite recreational spot.** *(Photo by Deborah Tackett)*

6. **Douglas Entrance, built in 1925-27 at Douglas Road and Tamiami Trail, is the most grand of Merrick's gateways to Coral Gables. It consisted of a tower, gateway, shops, galleries and apartments. Slated to be demolished for a parking lot in the 1960s, it was saved by preservationists and is now part of a multi-use center blending the old and new.** (*Photo by Deborah Tackett)*

7. **The Country Club Prado Entrance, constructed in 1927 as a formal Italian garden, is a popular setting for brides posing in their long white gowns.** (*Courtesy of Dade Heritage Trust)*

8. **The Biltmore Hotel, built in 1925 as the centerpiece for Merrick's planned city of Coral Gables, is a National Historic Landmark and one of Florida's greatest architectural treasures.** *(Courtesy of The Biltmore Hotel)*

9. **The Coral Gables City Hall, designed by Phineas Paist and Denman Fink, was erected in 1927-28. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it is an outstanding example of Spanish Renaissance architecture.** *(Courtesy of Dade Heritage Trust)*

10. **The Bell Tower of the Coral Gables City Hall features a ceiling painted by Denman Fink depicting the four seasons.** *(Courtesy of Dade Heritage Trust)*

11. **The Colonnade Building on Miracle Mile was built in 1926 as George Merrick's sales office and was used for a pilot training center during World War II. The original building has now been incorporated into the highrise Colonnade Hotel complex.** (*Photo by Deborah Tackett*)

12. **The Biscayne Cafeteria on Miracle Mile in Downtown Coral Gables has been a landmark for generations of residents seeking plentiful Southern cooking.** (*Photo by Deborah Tackett*)

13. **The French City Village, built in 1925-26 along the l000 block of Hardee Road, was one of George Merrick's themed "villages" scattered throughout the city to add architectural diversity to his predominantly Mediterranean-styled town.** (*Photo by Deborah Tackett)*

14. **The Chinese Village, along the 5100 block of Riviera Drive, was designed by Henry Killam Murphy in 1926.** (*Photo by Deborah Tackett)*

15. **This Mediterranean building was used by the University of Miami until 1948. The site is now the Coral Gables Youth Center Playing Fields.**
(Courtesy of Dade Heritage Trust)

16. **Matheson Hammock Park and Marina, located off tree-lined Old Cutler Road in South Gables, features a beautiful bayfront beach, a bike path through the mangroves, and picnic grounds in a natural oak hammock. The original 84 acres were donated to Dade County by William Matheson in 1930.** (*Photo by Becky Roper Matkov)*

17. **Fairchild Tropical Garden was founded by Col. Robert Montgomery, who donated the first 58 acres of land in 1938. Located along Old Cutler Road, the garden was designed by landscape architect William Lyman Phillips and is renowned for its collection of palms.** (*Courtesy of Fairchild Tropical Garden*)